

HarpShop

Getting the Overblows and Overdraws

Many people have Emailed me asking me how to overblow and overdraw. So I figured that I really should put a short summary of how to do it here on the web site. I deal with it (and everything else) at great length in my video, "New Directions for Harmonica", and I prefer teaching this live, but nonetheless, here it is.

First, I regret that I use the term "overblow". I got the idea to call it that in 1970 from asking a sax player what I was doing. He thought that I was overblowing harmonics from the natural overtone series, the way you can on wind instruments like sax, trumpet, flute, etc. I wasn't. The term also gives the false impression that you have to blow or draw harder to get the notes to come out from doing this. You don't. It's just another kind of bending, and if the harp is adjusted right- reeds adjusted as close as possible to the reed plates- you don't have to blow or draw harder. Overblows and overdraws provide a player with all of the notes that are "missing" from the diatonic harmonica.

Adjusting Reeds

It isn't hard to adjust a reed if you need to. First, remove the cover plates. The draw reeds are on the outside of the lower reedplate- you can push them in with a fingernail. If you need to push them back out again, you can reach in with a small jewelers screwdriver, a toothpick, etc, and push them back out. The blow reeds are on the inside of the upper plate. Reach in and push up to get them closer to the plate, and push down from above to move them back away. There are other things you can do to the reeds to make them overblow and overdraw more easily, but these are the most basic and most important.

All reeds have a slight curve that keeps them close by the base and slightly curved up at the end. it is very important to maintain this curvature.

Bends

The position of the tongue and shape of the mouth create the resonances that enable a player to bend, overblow, or overdraw notes. There must be a vacuum inside the mouth/throat area for efficient bending, so the nose should be closed for all types of bending. (Most players do this naturally, but

I thought that I should mention it.)

I will assume that anyone reading this already knows how to bend. For a standard bend, a player can bend the higher pitched reed on a hole down to just above the lower pitched reed on the same hole. For example, on a C harp (the harp I'll refer to from here on), you can bend 1 draw (D) down to just above 1 blow (C), so that 1 draw bend is a C#/Db. It works like this for all the bends, both draw and blow, no matter how close or far apart in pitch the two reeds are. On the second hole, for example, 2 draw is a G, 2 blow is an E, an interval of a minor 3rd between them. So you can bend 2 draw down to Gb/F# (a half step) and F (a whole step).

The only reeds you can't really bend are 5 draw and 7 blow, because they are both just 1/2 step higher than the other reed on the same hole. You can bend them a little, but compared to reeds on the other holes, they don't have anyplace to go. The way a standard bend works physically is that the higher reed bends down for the first part of the bend, and then the lower reed bends up for the rest of it. It sounds weird, but this is really the way it works. Take a harp apart, try bending in front of a mirror, and watch the reeds. It takes two reeds to bend.

Until a player can play all the draw and blow bends smoothly, he shouldn't attempt overblowing/overdrawing. He should also learn all of the notes that he is getting on all of the bends- it will really help later. (Playing the notes on a keyboard while bending is a good way to check pitch of bent notes.)

Overblows

When you are ready to try overblowing, practice blow bending 8 blow, and getting it to bend very smoothly at moderate volume, up and down, so there's no crack where the pitch changes- I will assume that whoever is reading this knows how to blow bend. (8 blow bends down from E to Eb.)

Move down to 6 blow (G) and try the same thing on that hole. If you are relaxed and your harp is set up well for this (reeds close to the plates), a higher note will pop out of the harp- Bb, a minor 3rd higher than G. The 6 blow reed (G), acts as what is called a "closing reed", and the higher- pitched draw reed, an A, actually bends up to a Bb, giving you the illusion that the 6 blow has "popped up" a minor third.

When you get good at this, you will find that the overblown note is very flexible. A player can bend that Bb down almost to A, and up to B or even C if the harp's reeds are really set up close to the reedplate.

This technique works on 1,4,5,and 6 blow, getting Eb, Eb, F#, and Bb, and along with all the standard bends, blows and draws, fills in all the notes of

the 12 tone (chromatic) scale for the first two octaves of the harp. The technique for 5 and 4 are slightly different than for 6. As the notes get lower, the mouth has to assume a shape that would make a deeper sound if you pronounced it. For example, 6 would be “gee” (with the g like the g in golly), 5 would be “guh”, 4 would be “gooh” . (You can also overblow 2 and 3 blow- you will get Ab from 2 OB and C from 3 OB.)

I think that harps from A to Eb are the easiest ones to overblow on. When the harps get much lower, it is harder to get 4 (and 1) overblow. The positions for overblowing get further back in the mouth, and it's more difficult to maintain them with the right amount of pressure to make a sustained, strong sound. 6 overblow can get a little tricky on the higher harps like F for the opposite reason- the embouchure might be too tight for some players.

Getting the overblow on the first hole is different. The easiest way to get it is to blow 1, draw 1, then make the shape of a very deep “who or coo”, and blow 1 again, and you will get an Eb if your reeds are anywhere near the plates. The back of your tongue will be very close to the roof of your mouth. Do this smoothly and fairly quickly. Then, remember the position your mouth was in for 1 overblow and try hitting the Eb directly. It's not easy, but with enough practice, it does get easier.

You can also get 1 overblow using mouth breathing- no breathing from the lungs through the throat at all, just pushing air quickly in and out on the first hole with your tongue making that “who” shape, getting D and Eb on draw and blow.

Overdraws

On the top of the harp (7 to 10), since the draw notes are now the lower-pitched reeds, we overdraw , so the higher blow reed bends up. Reed adjustment is even more critical. These reeds are very short, and if they are not close enough to the reedplate, you can get a very uncomfortable strained feeling in your neck and sides of your head when you try to overdraw.

Start with 7 draw, B. Try bending it down much the same way you would bend 6 draw. This isn't a deep bend like 2 draw- if you were to pronounce the word “key”, that's a similar mouth position to the one you need to overdraw 7. When you do it right, you will hear a note a whole step higher (C#) come out. 7 draw is B, which acts as the closing reed. 7 Blow is C, so it bends up to C# when you “overdraw”. The note you get is flexible, as the overblown notes are. Though it is hard to bend it down toward C, you can bend the C# up to a D pretty easily. The ability to bend overblows and overdraws also gives a player more bends on the harp, more ways to be bluesy.

Overdraws are available on 9 and 10, and give you G# and C#. So now, with bends and overblows, you can play all 12 tones in the top octave of the harp, plus a C# above high C. It can be harder to get overdraws on higher key harps, because the reeds are so short and high, but with good adjustment, it can be done. The lower harps are easier to everdraw on, even down to G and low F. But even on these, good adjustment is essential.

Good luck. By being able to play all the notes, you will be able to get more music out of your diatonic harmonicas. That's what it's all about.